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John Clarke, Physician, Philanthropist, Preacher and Patriot.

BY
HON. WM. P. SHEFFIELD,
OF NEWPORT, R. I., LATE UNITED STATES SENATE.

An Oration delivered before the American Medical Association, June 25, 1889.

Reprinted from the "Journal of the American Medical Association," August 24, 1889.

CHICAGO
PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATION.
1889.

U.S. 14133.1

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The Anchor

JOHN CLARKE, PHYSICIAN, PHILANTHROPIST, PREACHER AND PATRIOT.

No person however equipped for the duty, who duly appreciates the undertaking, can arise to address an audience of men trained in any department of science without embarrassment.

This embarrassment is increased with the consciousness of the want of the special knowledge in which the audience before me are adepts, and by the different schools of professional life in which we have been trained.

Before me is an audience of men selected from the most eminent of the devotees of the most abstruse of physical sciences, while I have no claim to their attention, but the having from an unfortunate accident, presented a case which has attracted the notice of some very eminent persons in one of the departments of their humane profession.

The teachings of experience are that the human race are prone to violate the laws of life and health, and all of the analogies of Nature as well as of the revealed law of God indicate that penalty falls upon violated law, and that there is the necessity of a curative or healing process.

Evangelical Christianity as well as civil codes, are based upon these fundamental ideas. Here rest the foundations for the necessity of the office, and from these premises may be drawn the outline of the duties of the physician. A profession sanctioned by the example of the Savior of man-

kind in His healing of the sick, and making the lame to walk.

The limits prescribed to me as well as the proprieties of this occasion, forbid any further advance in this direction.

I have been asked to speak to you of John Clarke. Many who hear me will ask, Who was John Clarke? I answer, the pioneer physician of Rhode Island, the first Baptist Clergyman in America, the author and procurer of the Charter for the State of Rhode Island which remained the fundamental law of the State until May, 1843, and up to the time of its repeal was the oldest and most liberal written constitution of government in Christendom.

John Clarke was born in Bedfordshire, England, October 8, 1609. I have not ascertained where he was educated, but it has been said that he was "a master of his native tongue and learned in the ancient languages."

The Rev. D. B. Ray, on the authority of "The Trilemma," says that "he received his baptism in Elder Stillwill's Church in London." He writes, "in the year 1637 I left my native land, and in the ninth month of the same (November), I arrived in Boston." He came while the court was in session, and after the death sentence of Mrs. Hutchinson.

On the 17th of May previous, the Massachusetts General Court had enacted a law forbidding towns and persons to receive any stranger who resorted there with intent to reside in that jurisdiction, or to allow any lot or habitation to any such, or to entertain them above three weeks, but under allowance of one of the governor's council or under the hands of two of the magistrates. For a violation of this law a heavy penalty was provided.

Unhappily, Clarke entered Boston while this law was in force, and during the pendency of a bitter controversy which had arisen out of the question whether the internal evidence of the Spirit, which was called the covenant of grace, or the works demonstrated in the lives of professors, was the better evidence of justification before God.

The Rev. John Wheelwright, who was an ardent advocate of the covenant of grace, had been tried for his heresy, and was already under sentence of banishment.

And on the 20th of November, a few day's after Mr. Clarke's arrival in Boston, many other persons, including Mr. Clarke, were given liberty to depart from that Colony, and Clarke went into banishment with Wheelwright, and they spent the winter in Exeter, New Hampshire. When Clarke came to Boston, he was 28 years of age. He was described as being a physician.

He complained of the coldness of the New Hampshire winter, and in Boston early in the following March, he joined eighteen of the victims of the covenant of grace, and crossed the Country to Providence, where he arrived within the first seven days of March, and from there went to Plymouth with William Coddington, to see about obtaining a place for a settlement, and then returned to Providence, and signed a compact for the settlement of Rhode Island on the 7th of March, and the next day with his co-settlers came to Rhode Island in Roger Williams' shallop, and on the 24th of March, with Coddington and Williams, went across the Bay to Canonocus's city, and there they procured the title to this island. Here they lived in caves until they could provide better shelters.

Among their early acts in the Spring of 1638,

was to appoint a committee to lay out a site, and to provide for the erection of a meeting-house. Clarke was their preacher, as well as their physician. The men whom he accompanied to Rhode Island, had among them some who were gentle born, men of learning and of high characters.

They had no charter from the Crown, but had agreed upon a form of government based upon the Bible as their constitution, and the majority of the masters of families as its final interpreter only in civil things. They declared their form of government to be democratic, and for full liberty of conscience so long as conscience was not sought as a shield for breaking the public peace.

New men came among them who denied the validity of their government in the absence of a royal charter. Here a question arose which seriously threatened the peace of the Colony. Then Coddington, Clarke and others, early in 1639, removed to Newport, and there commenced the settlement of the town in which we are now assembled.

In the following December a church had been organized, and Clarke was its preacher.

John Clarke was now actively engaged with his co-settlers in establishing the Colony, and in preparing a concordance of the Bible.

In July, 1651, the church at Newport received a request from William Witter, an aged blind man of its faith and order, that some of the church would visit him at his residence in Lynn, in the Colony of Massachusetts. Clarke, accompanied by Obadiah Holmes and John Crandall, responded to Witter's invitation, and went to Lynn. On Sunday, while at Witter's, with Witter and his family and four or five other persons, while conversing upon religion, two constables arrested the three visitors and took them to

the Lynn church and detained them until the next morning, when they were taken before a magistrate when, without evidence being adduced against them, they were convicted of having been taken by the constable at a private meeting at Lynn upon the Lord's day exercising among themselves, to whom diverse of the town repaired and joined with them, for which Clarke was sentenced to pay £20 or to be whipped. He refused to pay the fine or to assent to its payment by others, yet the fine was secretly paid without his consent, while Holmes and Crandall both suffered the infliction of the alternative sentence, and were severely whipped.

A difficulty had arisen in the Colony, and in consequence thereof, William Coddington, who had been governor, had obtained from the ruling power in England, a commission to be governor of the Island of Rhode Island for life. The Colony up to that time had maintained a democratic form of government, and this change in its civil polity aroused the people to resist the change. The attention of the people was at once turned to Dr. Clarke, and a request signed by sixty-five, a majority of the freemen at Newport, and by 41, a majority of the freemen of Portsmouth, was presented to him to go to England and procure a revocation of Coddington's Commission, and to endeavor to secure a charter protecting the rights of the Colony. He accepted this service, and in November, 1651, with Roger Williams, who represented the Providence Colony, sailed for England, and here commenced Dr. Clarke's career as a Statesman. I use the term Statesman in its higher and better sense, for the popular mind overlooking literal meanings draws a wide distinction between the terms Statesman and politician. The latter thus

is made to signify the art of obtaining votes by calculation, and by cunning and adroit methods, while the former implies the power to wisely organize, and prudently administer a government for the people. In this sense it will appear that John Clarke, though he was the contemporary of Sidney, of Cromwell, of Vane and of John Milton, was endowed with a genius of Statesmanship above, and in advance of that which any man of his time was enabled to practically apply to the government of a civil State.

In England Dr. Clarke was kindly received by the leaders in the great struggle which was then being carried on. Coddington's commission was at once suspended and ultimately revoked. Clarke remained in England, the agent of the Colony for twelve years, during which time he published his concordance of the Scriptures. (Aug. 3, 1655.)

In the calender of Colonial State Papers, p. 427, is the following entry: "John Clarke, physician of Rhode Island, in America, having composed and very closely compacted a new concordance to the Holy Scriptures of Truth, which in regard of its plainness and fulness, and yet smallness of volume and price may prove singularly conducive to the help of those who desire to try all things in these trying times by that touch stone of truth. Henry Hill is licensed to print and publish the same to the exclusion of all others, and the Company of Stationers are required to enter this order in their Register."

I am not aware that a single copy of this concordance has survived the wastes of the intervening centuries.

Clarke mortgaged his estates in Newport to Richard Dean, to obtain money in London to support himself while he was abroad on the business of the Colony.

His occupations during the twelve years he was the agent of the Colony in London, are largely left to inference and to the declaration of the town of Warwick, which in refusing to pay its proportion of the expenses, he incurred in rendering his great service to the Colony while in England said: "He was much employed about modeling of matters concerning the affairs of England, in which no doubt he was encouraged by men of no small estates." It is known that he was on intimate terms with, and was often the guest of Sir Henry Vane, and that he sustained friendly relations with other leading men in England in the time of the Commonwealth.

Both Massachusetts and Connecticut sought, while Dr. Clarke was the agent of the Rhode Island Colony, to obtain parts of the territory of the latter Colony to be annexed to their respective territory. Clarke, by unwearyed exertion, and with remarkable address, defeated these designs. In 1662, in behalf of the Colony of Rhode Island, he presented two addresses to the Crown, asking for a Royal Charter. If Clarke's fame stood alone upon these wonderful State papers, he would have been regarded as having made one of the boldest and clearest conceptions of the rights of persons, and of the most advanced theories of civil government that up to that time had ever been announced. He closed the second of these Addresses with the following passage, which was embodied in the Charter:

"Your petitioners have it much on their hearts, (if they may be permitted) to hold forth a lively experiment, that a flourishing civil State may stand, yea, and be best maintained, and that among English spirits, with a full liberty in religious concerns, and that true piety rightly governed upon gospel principles will give the

best and greatest security to true sovereignty, and will lay in the heart of men the strongest obligations to a true loyalty."

The Charter was granted by the King to the great displeasure of his counsellors of State, and new principles were thus embodied into civil government. Mind was emancipated when conscience was made free. And a people were enabled to make their own laws which by the charter might be pleaded in bar to an Act of Parliament or of the King. Laws which were not to be subjected to the risks of a royal veto. And under that charter, says Calmers, the people of Rhode Island acted as if they were without the King's dominions. It is safe to say, that up to that time, and until after the American Revolution, no fundamental law of any State in Christendom had embodied absolute freedom in religious concerns, and so large a measure of civil liberty, as was embraced in the Charter of 1663.

On the 24th of November, with every possible demonstration of joy, the assembled freemen of the Colony adopted the Charter, and it became the fundamental law of the State, and so it remained until May, 1843.

The expressions of the gratitude of the Colony to Dr. Clarke and to the King, couched in language of extreme eulogy, were returned to them in England. While this charter was yet the fundamental law of the State, said Bancroft, the venerated historian of our country, "no where in the world has life, liberty, and property been better preserved than in Rhode Island under this royal Charter."

Graham, the Scotch historian, arraigned Dr. Clarke for the manner in which he obtained this Charter from the Crown. This attracted the

attention of Mr. Bancroft, who was the first prominent writer of American history to do justice to the founders of Rhode Island, and he demonstrated that the charges of Graham rested mainly upon what occurred at Westminster between the King and John Greene and Randall Holden, who went to England after the decease of Dr. Clarke, not as the agents of the Colony, but in behalf of themselves and possibly some other settlers of the town of Warwick. In this controversy Mr. Edmund Quincy, and others in Boston, took the side of Graham, and Mr. Bancroft was ably supported by the late Professor Gammell. Mr. Bancroft has thus recorded his appreciation of Dr. John Clarke:

"Never did a young Commonwealth possess a more faithful friend than the modest and virtuous Clarke, the persevering and disinterested envoy, who during a twelve years' mission had sustained himself by his own exertions and a mortgage on his estate; whose whole life was a continued exercise of benevolence, and who at his death bequeathed all his possessions for the relief of the needy, and the education of the young. Others have sought office to advance their fortunes; he, like Roger Williams, parted with his little means for the public good. He had powerful enemies in Massachusetts, and left a name without a spot."

The Rev. John Callender, who was well acquainted with some of the men who in his time had known and been the associates of Dr. Clarke, said of him:

"He was a faithful and useful minister, courteous in all the relations of life, and an ornament to his profession, and to the several offices which he sustained. To no man is Rhode Island more indebted than to him. No character in New England is of purer fame than John Clarke."

The Rev. Isaac Backus, of Massachusetts, the historian of the New England Baptists, writing of Dr. Clarke, says :

"Mr. Clarke left as spotless a character as any man I know of, that ever acted in any public station in this country. The Massachusetts writers have been so watchful and careful to publish whatever they could find, which might seem to countenance the severities they used towards dissenters from their way, that I expected to find something of that nature against Mr. Clark, but I have happily been disappointed. Among all their authors or records that I have searched, I have not met with a single reflection cast upon him by anyone; which I think is very extraordinary. Few men ever merited the title of a Patriot more than he did, for he was a principal procurer of Rhode Island for sufferers and exiles. And when their rights and liberties were invaded, he crossed the ocean, and exerted all his influence, in twelve years' watchful and diligent labors for his Colony at the British Court, till he obtained a new Charter for them, of great and distinguishing privileges."

At the time of the arising of the Quaker Controversy in 1658, Rhode Island had received an official letter from the United Colonies, advising it not to entertain these people, and admonishing the Colony, "if it did receive and entertain them notwithstanding the advice of the United Colonies, that these Colonies would then see what God would move them to do to save themselves and their families from the influence of Quakerism."

This occurred while Dr. Clarke was the agent of the Colony in London. And the Colony addressed a letter to Dr. Clarke upon this subject, in which its appreciation of the doctor's services

is stated as follows : " We have known not only your ability and diligence, but also your love and care to be such concerning the welfare and prosperity of this Colony since you have been entrusted with the more public affairs thereof, surpassing that no small benefit which we formerly had of your presence at home, and in all straits and incumbrances are emboldened to repair to you for your continued counsel care and help, finding that your solid Christian demeanor hath gotten no small interest in the hearts of our superiors, those worthy and noble senators with whom you have had to do in our behalf, as it hath constantly appeared in your addresses made unto them, which we have by good and comfortable proofs found having plentiful experience thereof."

This letter besought Clarke " to have an eye and ear open in case our adversaries should seek to undermine us in our privileges granted unto us, and to plead our case in such sort as we may not be compelled to exercise any civil power over men's consciences, so long as human orders in point of civility are not corrupted and violated, which our neighbors about us do frequently practice, whereof many of us have large experience, and do judge it to be no less than absolute cruelty."

Referring to the Quakers, this letter sets out : " We have found no just cause to charge them with a breach of the civil peace. They are constantly going forth amongst them about us, and vex and trouble them in point of their religion and spiritual state, and return with many foul scars in their bodies for the same."

The situation of Dr. Clarke when in England was perplexing in the extreme, for Connecticut claimed the territory of Rhode Island on the west to Narragansett Bay, and Massachusetts and Ply-

mouth claimed the territory of the eastern part of the Colony also to the same Bay. So as the agent of the Colony he had to contend for the existence of his constituency. Happily for him, Connecticut was for a time represented in England by Governor John Winthrop, Jr., who was like Clarke a physician of eminence, and a devoted scientist. Clarke and Winthrop met as wise and just men should always meet, and agreed upon a settlement of the Connecticut boundary, the result of which settlement Clarke prudently had inserted in the Charter, and though afterwards long contentions were had between these Colonies, in which Connecticut sought to vacate this settlement, yet the boundary fixed by Clarke and Winthrop remains the line which marks the jurisdiction of the States of Rhode Island and Connecticut to this hour.

Clarke returned to Rhode Island to receive the gratitude of its people for the priceless benefaction his genius and Statesmanship had conferred upon the Colony in June, 1664.

On his return he was at once elected a member of the General Assembly, now organized under the Charter procured by his exertions, which secured beyond any lawful interference of Crown or Parliament the civil and religious liberties of the people. And upon which a government was to be framed on principles which had no traditions in the past history of the world. Clarke entered the Assembly. The first resolution to be passed was that thereafter every session of the Assembly should be opened by the reading of the patent.

A letter of thanks was drawn up and presented by the presiding officer to Dr. Clarke, and a committee was appointed to audit his accounts. He was also made a member of a committee to revise the laws of the Colony to see that they be made

to conform to the Charter, and was appointed a commissioner to run the boundary line between the Colony and the Colony of Connecticut.

The distinctive principles recognized in the foundations of the government of Rhode Island in the Charter procured by Dr. Clarke were :

1. The Indians had a title to the soil of which they could not be deprived but with their consent.

2. The right of the people who owned the soil to establish a civil government for those who should reside upon it, and to determine who should be admitted to be freemen with them.

3. The freedom of conscience from the control of the State, so long as the exercise of that freedom did not tend to the disturbance of the civil peace.

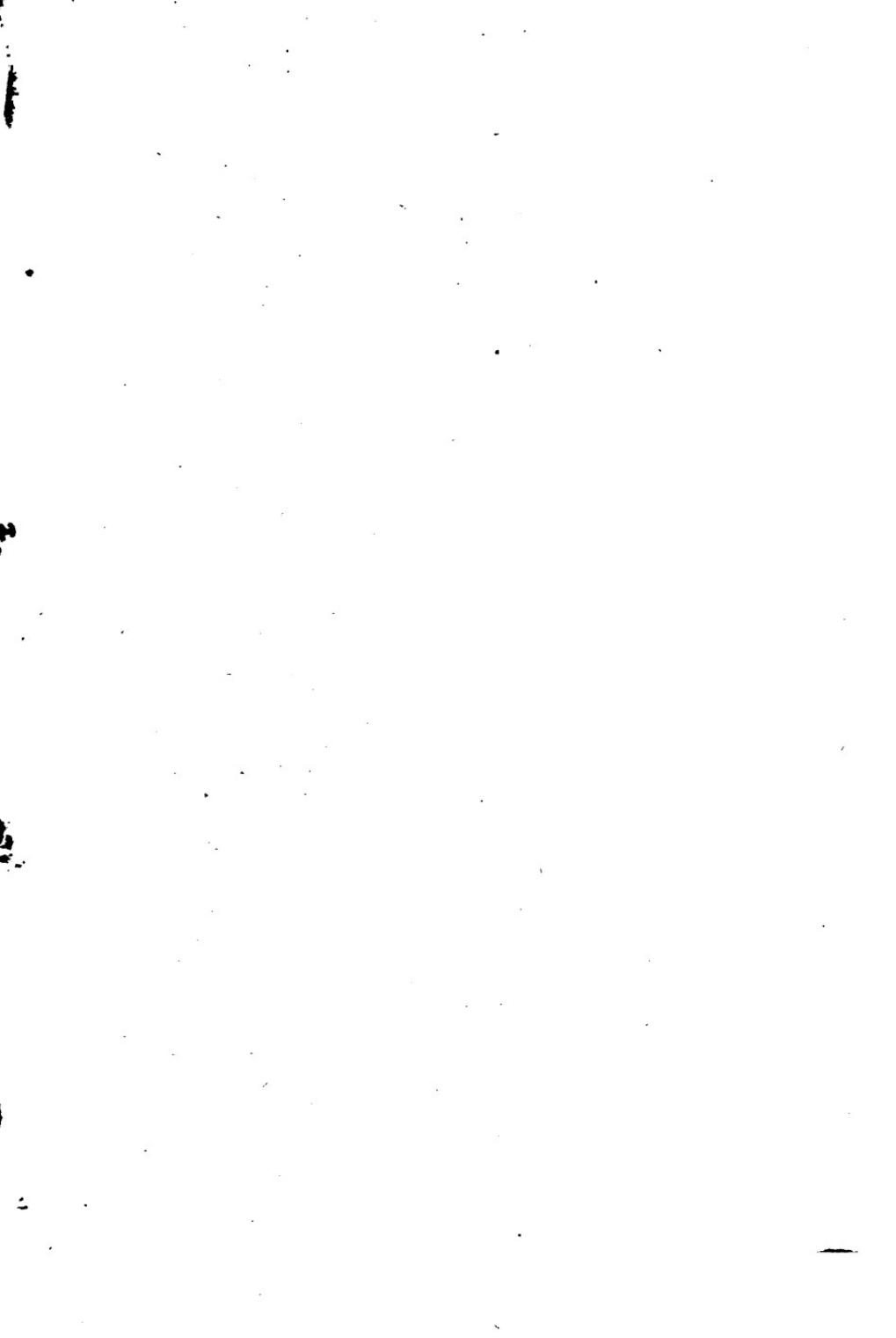
4. By the Charter it was provided that the legitimate exercise of authority conferred thereby should be a bar to any prosecution therefore, against any act or proceeding of the King or of Parliament.

The credit of the discovery of these principles in government Dr. Clarke shares with others, but the incorporation of the principles of civil and religious liberty into the Charter, and the protection of Chartered rights against the invasion of King and Parliament, by anticipating and applying to this quasi-corporation the principles long after settled in the Dartmouth College case, was the work of Dr. Clarke.

To properly appreciate the merit of these provisions we should place ourselves in the situation in which Dr. Clarke was placed, and surround ourselves by the state of governmental science, as it was at the time of the return of Charles II to the throne, and the granting of this Charter, and then look forward through the intervening time, and

watch the expansion of these principles in government as they, like the dawn of the coming day, have been spreading over the world. Then we reflect that principles are stronger than men; men die, but principles live forever. The principles incorporated into the Charter of Rhode Island are yet expanding and ameliorating the conditions of mankind, and will continue their work until they overthrow thrones and every where break down dynasties and hereditary privileges to govern. And the dissemination of education and morality among the masses of the people after the manner proposed by Dr. Clarke, and for which he by his will gave his private fortune, will fit the people to rise above the scrambling hoard of political pirates who now, like hungry dogs after prey, strive to obtain places which should be places of honor and trust, with as little scruple or regard to consequences as the privateersman disposes of his plunder and prize money.

Dr. Clarke was thrice married, but died childless, April 20, 1676, and was buried in what was the south-east corner of his orchard, near his dwelling, and his church on the northerly side of what is now West Broadway, in Newport.





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